JUST DO IT

October 13, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
James 1:22-26, 2:14-17

"...be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."
-James 1:22 (NRSV)

It's a loaded question: "What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and hungry and your response is 'Go in peace,' what good is that?"

Charles Schultz, whose Peanuts cartoon is a consistent commentary on the New Testament, had fun with that question in what has become one of his most famous sequences.

Frame one: Charlie Brown and Linus are trudging through the snow. The wind is blowing. It is very cold. They are bundled into snow suits, complete with fur hats.

Frame two: Snoopy is shivering, alone, in the snow, appropriately naked.

Frame three: Charlie Brown and Linus approach. Charlie Brown says: "Be of Good Cheer, Snoopy." "Yes, Snoopy," Linus echoes. "Be of Good Cheer."

Frame four: They walk away, leaving Snoopy with a question mark in his mind, still shivering in the snow.

"Faith without works is dead." It seems fairly simple actually. But behind it is another question, and it is not so simple. If faith without works is dead, what is faith?... What is this enterprise we call religious faith? And now we are in deeper than we intended.

Immanuel Kant, who was the greatest philosopher since the ancient Greeks, said there are three big questions about life:

What can we know?

What must we do?

What can we hope for?

One of the definitions of religion is the way we answer those three questions.

We ask them all our lives, beginning, but not ending, with our spiritual and intellectual awakening.

And they are asked eloquently by the men and women who live in the stories of the Bible.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" a wealthy young man asked Jesus. And his question, I conclude, is a way of asking: "What can I know? What must I do? What is my life about? What does it mean to be faithful?"

He's like us, this earnest, forthright young man searching for truth and meaning. He's an admirable fellow. It took courage to do what he did, coming to Jesus like that. He's got social grace, too. Notice how he kneels before Jesus - an extraordinary act for a wealthy man. I like him. He is the New Testament equivalent of the contemporary young urban adult, upscale, sincere, wondering about the meaning of his life and what he ought to do next...

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked... sincerely.

Jesus told him the traditional formulas. Keep the commandments: don't murder, steal, commit adultery, defraud. "I've done all that" the young man said. Or rather, "I've avoided all that. I'm clean. But I don't feel right."

And then Jesus tells him what to do: five crisp prescriptions: go - sell - give - come - follow: Just Do It.

And the young man is shocked and goes away grieving because he hadn't expected that.

Please notice in this famous incident that Jesus did not give him a reading list or a theological seminar to attend. He did not hand him the Apostles' Creed and say, "Here, recite this. You'll feel better."

Nor did he say, "get in touch with your feelings. Lighten up. Don't be so hard on yourself. You're okay, man."

Nor did he advise the young man to be more vigilant and vigorous in his ethical behavior. In fact, after bringing in the traditional prohibitions of the Ten Commandments, Jesus seems to brush them aside and says, "Do something."

Now, there is a lot more we could do with this little interchange, particularly the fact that his attachment to his wealth is what prevents the young man from doing what Jesus suggests. This being Stewardship Season, we could do a lot with this parable which follows about how hard it is for wealthy people to get into the Kingdom: as hard as it is for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle.

We could try to say that the "eye of the needle" was a small opening in the city wall. We could even say that what heavily loaded camels need to do is unload a lot of the goods they are carrying - as in a generous pledge to the church. But we won't do that today.

Instead, I'd like to take a leap of 2,000 years and simply suggest that the young man's question is as relevant as our being here this morning, and our quest to find meaning for our lives.

What does it mean to have faith? Sometimes we talk about faith as if we believe we have it like we have a temper, or brown hair. Sometimes we talk about faith as if it is something we know. The late Carlisle Marney wrote that "faith is always a verb. When we make faith into a noun," Marney wrote, we "freeze it into a creed." [Priests to Each Other, p. 36]

That is where many of us are. Having Christian faith is a matter of feeling something inside or it's intellectual, a matter of understanding ideas about God and Jesus; understanding doctrine, accepting it as truth. It's a bit of a dilemma for Presbyterians. We are committed to a reasonable, rational approach to religion. We believe that when the Bible orders us to love God with all our minds as well as our hearts and souls - it means just that; that we honor God when we bring the human intellect into the religious enterprise. Historically we have invested a lot of our religious energy in the commitment to an educated ministry, to colleges and universities and seminaries: to an educated laity; to pedagogically sound Church School curriculum, and adult education experiences that stretch the mind as well as spirit.

So it is perhaps most difficult for Presbyterians to come to terms with the notion that faith is not essentially knowing something or understanding something about God.

Well, if faith is not something we have, or something we know, maybe it is something we don't do.

There is a continuing sense that Christians can be identified by what they refrain from doing. Carlisle Marney, who was a Southern Baptist, used to quip that "Baptists are people who don't drink with their friends. And Methodists are people whose colleges are built with tobacco money but whose pastors must not smoke." [op. cit. p. 42]

Faith, according to Jesus, is not something you refrain from doing.

The recent and continuing flap throughout the churches on the matter of sexual behavior is a case in point. It would appear that most people are willing to confine their definitions of morality to what people refrain from doing, and are satisfied that religion has played its role when it identifies the taboo and tells its constituents and the world what not to do. That God may have something more in mind, that religious faith may require behavior which is faithful and just, rather than a simple prohibition of certain activities is a profoundly disturbing notion for many people.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? What can I know? What must I do? If you are intellectually and spiritually alive you ask these questions every day of your life. You may even have tried to find the answers in an academic regimen. It is not unheard of for people to go to seminary to find the answers to those questions.

When I did, I discovered that these questions were not yielding to investigative research. In fact, the more I read what other people thought the more the answers receded, until I realized that I might have to settle not for some not little bundle of certainty, but instead, for a life-long commitment to keeping the questions alive.

And then something happened. I met Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not personally, of course. Bonhoeffer died in a Nazi prison a few days before the end of World War Two, the defining event of my childhood and youth. I met him because people were reading his books - not as academic assignments, but extra reading, outside of class reading, compelling, relevant reading.

It was an important moment when I encountered this young man - just twenty or so years earlier, writing about the focus of the gospel being the world, the world God loves: writing just days before his execution that Jesus Christ calls his people to immerse themselves in the world. At a time when he more logically might have looked for solace in a God who promises salvation in other places, in another world, at just that moment to be writing about the call of Jesus Christ to men and women to love the world passionately, to be responsible for its life, to care so deeply

about it in the name of Jesus Christ that their lives would be given away in acts of justice and mercy and kindness and service.

It stirred my soul. But what really got me was this. Bonhoeffer said that understanding was not the point. Of course it was important to know God with the mind by thinking critically and creatively about theology. He was a distinguished scholar. But finally nailing down the truth about Jesus isn't the point. The point, said Bonhoeffer, is obeying Jesus. Taking a step. Following.

The sentence that got me and gets me still is this -

"Only those who obey can believe." [The Cost of Discipleship, p. 60]

We want to understand. We want to know who he is. We want to be told understandable truth. We want creeds we comprehend; a religion that is intellectually viable. And when we get all that in place we might entertain the notion of following, or obeying, or doing something Bonhoeffer said that's exactly backwards if we are waiting for faith to happen - either in the form of understanding, or out of the blue in a moment of divine revelation, we will wait a very long time.

Faith begins when we take a step.

Faith begins, not when you say - I have it, I feel it inside, I get it, I know it in my mind.

Faith in the New Testament begins when Peter stands up in the boat and steps into the stormy sea to follow Jesus.

Faith begins when Matthew the tax collector, walks out from his tax collecting booth and falls in behind Jesus.

Faith begins when James and John drop their nets and get up and follow.

Faith begins for you when you hear the call of Jesus Christ and find yourself doing something you hadn't thought of before, or wouldn't have done before.

Faith begins when your decision to follow Jesus takes shape in the way you live your life, spend your money, order your priorities, use your time.

It is a stewardship matter ultimately. A decision to use all to follow him. It has to do with your support of the church and its ministries, this church or whatever church you call your own. Money in the plate is not simply the way we pay the bills. It is that, of course. But what it really represents is the

integrity with which you are deciding to believe by following Jesus. Faith begins when we do it.

What might it be for you? Our Presbyterian tradition will not allow us to prescribe answers for one another. How you follow - how you take a first tentative faith step is between Jesus and you.

It might be like this: 2,000 years ago someone said that if you see a brother or sister naked, you might find a way to provide a blanket.

When you encounter hunger you might find a way to come up with some food.

A first faith step might be taking a public stand on an issue which will not endear you to your friends whose respect you enjoy.

It might mean writing a check or deciding to make a truly sacrificial financial commitment to your church.

It might mean going to a meeting, loving your husband, forgiving your child, bathing your bed-ridden mother.

It might mean living your life as a way of following Jesus.

My guess is that you know where he is asking you to follow and what he is telling you to do. The invitation which comes to all of us is simple. Be doers of the word and not hearers only. Just do it.

And then, it has been the experience of countless disciples that in the following, in the halting, frightened stumbling behind Jesus, faith is given.

It is in the personal decision to be a Christian that belief is given. No one ever said it more beautifully than Albert Schweitzer who, at the end of a scholarly inquiring into the nature of the historical Jesus, wrote this beautiful confession of his personal faith, the truth of which I proclaim to you.

> "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings, which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they

shall learn in their own experience who He is" [Albert Schweitzer, The Quest for the Historical Jesus.]

Be doers of the word.

Follow him.

And the gift of faith will be given to you.

That is the promise.

Amen.